

# Trial lawyer Shaun Kent 'commands attention'

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MANNING — Shaun Kent passed a painting of his face imposed on a chiseled man grabbing a bull by its horns as he exited his law office one recent Friday morning. He lowered himself into a \$250,000 black Aston Martin and raced off on these sleepy downtown roads to meet with a client who was just arrested.

The license plate reads “KENT.”

This life of luxury that Kent leads at the age of 48 marks a sea change from his childhood, when phone calls with his mom would cut off during her night shift at a chemical plant because she ran out of change at a payphone.

The Summerville native has risen from humble roots to the highest echelons of South Carolina’s clubby legal sphere, where he figures as one of the state’s most formidable trial attorneys. South Carolina Bar figures also show Kent is among the 7 percent of practicing attorneys in the state who are Black.

He knew from boyhood that he wanted to be a lawyer, though he says he’s not sure why. Kent opened his own firm at the age of 37 while still contending with student loan debt. Success did not come overnight. He recalls spending Christmas Eve in 2012 in the Berkeley County jail visiting one of his only three clients at the time.

“If you’re a young Black kid coming out of law school right now, how do you compete against the kid who has generational wealth? ... How do you convince people to hire you?” he said in his wooden-paneled office. “The challenge for me was be yourself, be loud about it and don’t apologize for it.”

Venerable Charleston attorney Andy Savage met Kent when he was an up-and-coming prosecutor in the Holy City. Savage recalls noticing Kent’s presence even before the young assistant solicitor spoke. At 6-foot-3, he moves gracefully throughout a courtroom, eschewing a podium or notes. He puts witnesses at ease while captivating jurors with a story.

“It’s like a living room conversation,” Savage said.

“I’d be very hard-pressed to say there was a better litigator than Shaun Kent,” Savage continued. “Of those who are in the arena, he’s premier. He’s a blue ribbon.”

### [Ex-S.C. State trustee guilty in corruption case](#)

Kent traces his rise to a single case: the sprawling corruption probe brought by the federal government in 2013 against S.C. State University’s board president that resulted in convictions for seven out of eight co-defendants.

Kent's client, Greenville businessman Eric Robinson, was the only one acquitted. Robinson was accused of paying university board chairman Jonathan Pinson kickbacks in exchange for university contracts. Pinson was Robinson’s business partner and former college roommate at SCSU. Robinson was looking at 20 years of prison time if convicted.

Co-defendants testified against Robinson and Pinson at trial in exchange for reduced sentences. The two-and-a-half week federal trial in July of 2014 featured 20 government witnesses, 200 government exhibits and more than 100 secretly recorded phone calls.

Pinson was represented by Jim Griffin, who would go on to defend disgraced former lawyer Alex Murdaugh in this year’s closely watched double-murder trial. Pinson was found guilty of 29 counts of a 45-count indictment and sentenced to four years in prison.

### [Alex Murdaugh’s defense attorneys: Who are Dick Harpootlian and Jim Griffin?](#)

Kent's client was acquitted of all seven charges. Kent's winning strategy in his most formative case? To be invisible. He wanted jurors to forget about his client as they were swept up in the government's campaign against Pinson.

Fewer than 1 percent of federal defendants in America go to trial and are acquitted, studies show. Kent said the case vaulted him from a "small-town lawyer" to a player on a statewide stage.

"This was the case that let other people know what I'd already been telling them: 'I'm pretty damn good.'"

He has since represented high-profile defendants, including Richard Quinn, the preeminent South Carolina Republican strategist whose downfall was set in motion by a years-long investigation into corruption at the Statehouse. Kent defended Quinn on perjury and obstruction of justice charges stemming from the 78-year-old man's testimony before a state grand jury. The charges against Quinn carried a maximum sentence of 80 years behind bars. Kent bargained for a plea deal this spring that kept S.C.'s Republican kingmaker out of prison.

He opened his own law firm in 2012 in Manning, a town just shy of 4,000 people and the county seat of Clarendon County. The county sits in the "Corridor of Shame," a rural region of the state stretching along Interstate 95 blighted by poverty, low-performing public schools and a declining population. Clarendon County, census data shows, saw an 11 percent dip in its population between 2010 and 2020.

### [SC GOP consultant Richard Quinn's guilty plea brings closure to Statehouse probe](#)

Kent says he loves going to work in a small town, where people have paid him in sweet potato pies. He charges \$850 an hour now, but he says he'll accommodate people based on their needs.

"I remember doors shutting on me when I needed stuff and somebody wasn't there for me," Kent said. "I hated that."

The pies may be delectable, but Kent's move to Manning was strategic.

"My whole goal throughout law school was to be the best criminal lawyer in the country. There were just so many lawyers in Charleston. To me, there's too many,"

he said. “I thought if I could go to a small town, stand out, then it could go statewide. And it worked.”

He has achieved success, in part, by standing out.

**A Summerville native, Shaun Kent, explains his choice of clothing, jewelry and even lotion matters in every detail for him as an attorney**

He sports colorful custom suits and gold Cartier jewelry and flashes a wide smile that reveals pearly white cosmetic dentistry. His tightly cropped beard frames prominent cheekbones.

Kent likes to draw a parallel to Superman’s alter ego, Clark Kent. His firm’s logo is the letter K fitted inside a Superman-style shield in the shape of South Carolina. He bulk orders custom-designed swag, including hats, sweatshirts and spring mountain bottled water.

That Kent compares himself to Superman reveals more than just his ego. The self-proclaimed “superhero dork” grew up watching superhero movies while his young parents were out working to support him and his brothers.

“I would love watching somebody fighting for the little guy,” he said.

Underneath Kent’s flair lies the generous son of a Baptist minister. He greets strangers on the street, devotes the majority of his time to defending the accused and donates food to children coming up in Clarendon County’s public schools.





## **Shaun Kent walks outside the courthouse in Charleston on Thursday, July 13, 2023. Laura Bilson/Staff**

### **‘Get to work’**

Kent was born to young parents from Savannah, neither of whom graduated from high school. They worked constantly to provide for their three sons. Kent’s mother named her second child Courtney because she wanted a girl. He legally changed his first name in 1999 to his middle name, Shaun.

His father was a training instructor for Western Sizzlin, Burger King and Cracker Barrel. His mother worked nights at the ExxonMobil chemical plant in Summerville and later became a Baptist minister.

He and his brothers would talk to their mother on the phone during her 10 p.m. break, Kent recalled. If she called their house and hung up, Kent knew to call her back because she didn’t have enough money to use a payphone.

“We grew up poor, but we didn’t know we were poor because they worked their asses off to give us everything we needed,” Kent said. “They raised us with the values of ‘no one’s gonna feel sorry for you. ... Get to work.’ ”

He attended Stratford High School in Goose Creek and earned an athletic scholarship to play soccer at the University of South Carolina at Aiken. The school’s athletics website shows Kent scored four goals during his senior season in the fall of 1995.

Kent’s co-captain and college roommate, Todd Ertel, said he thought Kent was destined for a career in politics: The political science major struck up conversations with everyone, ranging from fast-food workers to women in downtown Aiken’s bars. Kent was a well-dressed “neat freak” who usually played the role of designated driver for his teammates. Ertel said the only time he saw his teammate upset was when Ertel, aiming for a player on the opposing team, landed

a punch on Kent's face.



**The University of South Carolina Aiken 1993 Men's Soccer Team.  
Provided**

Kent received a letter by mail offering him a partial scholarship to enroll at Thomas M. Cooley Law School, which has since merged with Western Michigan University. Kent graduated from the school in 2000. He spent a year at the Aiken County Public Defender's Office before prosecuting cases for two years in Charleston for the 9th Circuit Solicitor's Office.

He started trying cases immediately at the public defender's office, where attorneys manage caseloads in the hundreds. Wallis Alves was the deputy Aiken County Public Defender at the time. She said Kent frequently walked into her office, asking, "What can I do to help this person? What can we do?"

“I’m a career public defender,” Alves said. “I like it when I see people who are passionate about trying to help people.”

Ninth Circuit Solicitor Scarlett Wilson, who hired Kent to work as a prosecutor in her office in 2001, described her former colleague as a sharp, witty attorney with a “larger-than-life personality.”

“He commands attention,” Wilson said. “That is certainly an asset when you need a judge or a jury to pay attention to you. He has an ability to ensure that he has a spotlight.”

But he’s not all show, she said. “I think that’s probably one of the things that is surprising to people. ... He doesn’t rely only on his natural abilities. He puts in the work.”

Kent is self-aware enough to know that people might be quick to judge him.

“You see a guy walk in with a teal suit or a red suit, you got one or two options,” he said. “Either he’s an idiot pimp from Oakland or, damn, this guy’s gonna be ready to go! And I hope I’m the second.”

#### **A scream**

Kent’s theatrics were on display in June during a recent jury trial, in which he represented a defendant charged with murder in Charleston County.

Algernard Young was accused of gunning down his ex-wife’s paramour outside her West Ashley apartment complex one rainy night in November 2019. The victim, David Alston, was shot in the back of the head while carrying a bag of shredded cheese.

Kent wore a ruby suit and matching tie during his closing argument. He focused on the testimony of the defendant’s ex-wife, who said she heard the defendant scream outside the parking lot at the time of the shooting, placing him at the scene of the crime.

“An earwitness,” Kent mocked prosecutors. “That’s all they gave you.”

Kent, seizing on his spotlight, proceeded to exit the courtroom. He disappeared.

From the hallway, he belted out a scream.

He returned to deliver his final act: a rehearsed soliloquy on the principle of reasonable doubt — the standard for a not guilty verdict — illustrated through a family anecdote. Years ago, his dad hesitated to give his younger brother a beating, he explained, because the father was unsure if his mischievous son or an open window caused the slamming of a bedroom door.

The speech evoked nostalgia: the smell of his mother's homemade collard greens; the sound of Percy Sledge on a record player; the feel of a breeze blowing in the wind.

### [Jealous ex-husband convicted of murder and sentenced in Charleston County](#)

Jurors smiled. They deliberated for four hours before finding Kent's client guilty.

"The system is not designed for everyone to get a not guilty (verdict)," Kent said. "But if I can get someone to listen and do their job and focus and go critically through the evidence, it works."

#### **Sparty and Clarke**

Kent stared at his reflection in a sunlit bedroom mirror one July morning as he dressed to appear in court. He retied a red and blue paisley tie twice to get it perfect, buttoned the waist coat of a three-piece navy suit, popped the jacket's collar and swapped out a red pocket square for a white one.

Details, and control, are everything to him.

**Shaun Kent gets ready for work in his downtown apartment in Charleston on Thursday, July 13, 2023. He retied the knot several times before he got the "dimple to look just right." Laura Bilson/Staff**  
**Laura Bilson lbilson@postandcourier.com**

"I've always just wanted to have complete, utter control of everything, whether it's my body, whether it's my mind or whether it's my haircut," he said.

Kent abstains from alcohol and drugs in a profession that reports high rates of drug abuse and alcoholism.

Six of his colleagues have died in the past several years as a result of stress, he said.



“You tell a criminal defense attorney that they have an innocent client, you don’t sleep,” he said. “We take everyone’s pain home.”

Kent, who records a new phone voicemail every morning detailing his schedule, acknowledges that he’s tired. But he said being genuine and squeezing joy out of gloom helps stave off exhaustion.

He sticks to a regimented schedule so that he can carve out time for family, friends, work, golf and the gym.

Kent and his wife spend weekdays apart so that they can tend to their professions. He commutes an hour from his home in Summerville’s Legend Oaks golf course community to his Manning office. Xeniya, his wife, lives in their one-bedroom apartment in downtown Charleston, where she works as an esthetician. Kent joins her at their condo on weekends.



Xeniya Kent hails from Kazakhstan and is 14 years younger than her husband. They met at the Belk department store in Mount Pleasant and married in 2017. They have two Pomeranians, Sparty and Clarke.



**A selection of watches, jewelry and perfume lay on a countertop as Shaun Kent gets ready for work in his apartment in Charleston on Thursday, July 13, 2023. Laura Bilson/Staff**

“Probably my biggest regret is that I wish I had kids. I really do. I think I would have been a good daddy,” Kent said. “But I got married later in life because I was very, very, very, very, very committed to the practice of law. The practice of law, if you do it right, is a jealous mistress.”

#### **‘Matchless for beauty and hospitality’**

Kent’s offices look out onto the Clarendon County courthouse, which faces a monument erected to the soldiers who fought in “The War for Southern Independence.” Kent says he doesn’t want the statue taken down. It grounds him and serves as a daily reminder that his ancestors, held down by systemic oppression, were unable to accomplish the thriving practice that he has now established for himself.



He left the solicitor's office in Charleston in 2003 after a defense firm in Manning offered him a job. He worked at the firm for years before making his debut in politics in 2012, when a state senate seat representing Manning opened up. Kent collected roughly 4,500 signatures to appear on the ballot for District 36. He won less than 10 percent of votes on Election Day, ultimately receiving fewer votes than signatures. He opened his law practice a month later.

Many people, Kent said, have since encouraged him to run for office again, but "it's not happenin'."

Asked why, he lets out a big sigh.



**Circuit Judge Bentley Price listens to Shaun Kent as he recommends sentencing his client at the courthouse in Charleston on Thursday, July 13, 2023.**

"I don't know. I don't have the heart for it," he said. "It's not in my cards anymore."

He added that he likes to help people without having his motivations questioned or asking for favors in return.

Kent's Aston Martin sticks out on the modest streets of Manning, which claims the motto "matchless for beauty and hospitality." But he has become known in the town for other things.

Travin Sanders and his wife own the pink-colored salon next door to Kent's law firm, Ashley's Beauti Bar. The barber gave a 4-year-old boy a buzz cut as his children ate pancakes off paper plates in the back of the shop. He said of Kent: "If you look at him, you think 'Oh, he's not approachable.' But he's very down to earth, calm, respectable, giving ... If there's something that he can do to help anyone, he definitely would bend over backwards to do so."

Stephanie Casselman recalled from behind the register at Lucy's Traditional Southern Bakehouse, where the tables are decked in red-and-white-checkered tablecloth, that Kent once treated a group of middle schoolers to ice cream at Sonic.

"It's nice for people to give back," she said.

This spring, Kent donated Chick-fil-A to 4,500 students and 600 staff in the Clarendon County School District.

Asked why, Kent offered three possible outcomes:

A kid devours his chicken sandwich and never thinks twice about it.

A kid notices the chicken sandwich came from a lawyer dressed in a fancy suit. He decides he wants to be like that lawyer when he grows up and starts working toward that goal.

A kid remembers that Kent donated chicken sandwiches. The kid grows up and gets arrested. He calls Shaun Kent Law Firm to represent him because he believes the lawyer in the fancy suit has his back.

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